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|  | *In The World:***Jeremy Begbie: Transformational with a twist**

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| http://clubs.calvin.edu/chimes/000121/images/Jeremy_Begbie.jpg |
| *courtesy January Series* |
| Begbie, director of the University of Cambridge’s ‘Theology Through the Arts’ program, addresses Kuyper, CCM and hot spirituality.  |

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By Tim ThompsonA&E CO-EDITOR **This interview was conducted with Dr. Jeremy Begbie, British theologian and musician, on Jan. 14, after his January Series lecture titled “The Music of God and the God of Music.”****A&E:** *Could you offer some very general advice or guidelines for students? — a lot of students here are increasingly coming from a diversity of backgrounds and aren’t always acquainted with the “transformational” view of culture.**Could you offer some guidelines for those who are just coming into this and trying to actively engage culture? What kind of things need to be avoided, do you think?**Maybe we could focus on pop music, since that’s so pervasive.***Jeremy Begbie:** OK, I see. Well, can I keep it general first? Number one, the main thing, retreat is not an option. In other words, our call is to live lives in the world, in society — responsible Christian lives in the public arena.We (especially in Europe) live in a culture that wants to separate public and private — public is the world, private is religion and values. But that kind of approach is hopeless from the Christian perspective. So retreat is not an option.The second thing is that you need to know how to keep your wisdom, specifically Christian wisdom, about right action. The secret is not to retreat but to discern.There are a number of things that come out of that: it’s incredibly important, as far as we can, to understand what is going on in our culture, what worldviews are operating — and there’s not just one worldview at work, there are usually many. What ultimate convictions and assumptions and aspirations are working in this artist?We can talk about a kind of smorgasbord, eclectic approach to religion or art, but actually, you can only be eclectic from a certain point of view. You know, I can only choose these things if I adopt a certain stance. So in other words, we’re all ultimately driven by certain ultimate assumptions. And you need to know what those are.To be more specific, when it comes to pop music or any other art form, you need to ask not so much what’s the nature of this work as an entity separated from society, but how is this work of art operating in the culture in which we’re living? So the question “Are the notes of pop music bad or good?” is a kind of silly question. The question is “What are these arrangements of notes doing as people use them, enjoy them, sell them, dance to them and all the other things that you do with notes?”That takes a bit of time and you’ve got to be wise to what’s actually going on in the culture before seeking to praise or blame.**A&E:** *So it’s art in action and not some set-off object for contemplation?***JB:** I think that the notion of the disinterested contemplation of works of art — as if works of art could be separated from the networks of actions which make them — that’s just a fallacy. They have a role in culture, and we need to know what that is. But that takes work, so whether you’re a Christian or non-Christian, you’ve got to be wise to what’s going on.So the responsible response means being wise to the current thought, worldviews and assumptions. ...**A&E:** *In your book “Voicing Creation’s Praise,” you talk about the need for a communal emphasis in art-making. ...***JB:** Right, because you can only be wise in community. Ultimately it’s a question of whom you trust. Now if you say you trust the Bible, that’s OK, fine, but actually, you are dependent on interpreters; we all are. Whether it be our minister, our friends, a Christian group or whatever.So if we want to be discerning about God’s ways in culture, we need to recognize that we need someone we trust to help us do that. Pinpoint those people, pray with them, get to know them or whatever. Know who you trust and know why you trust them.And then there are wider communities, like the church or like discussion groups or whatever, and as far as the arts are concerned, yes, I think art is going to be a communal enterprise.**A&E:** *What about some dangers of that kind of communal perspective? What about, say, Contemporary Christian Music, which is kind of ghettoized? How do you keep from withdrawing into your own community?***JB:** I know, it’s a good point. I think again you do all that you can to keep in touch with what’s going on in the culture at large, and interpret what’s going on from a Christian perspective and learn from it. And say, “Well here’s this cultural music or here’s this type of music in culture” or “Here’s this type of song” or whatever it is. “What’s going on there and what can that teach me as a Christian?”The trouble with some Contemporary Christian Music is that it’s assumed that “God is here,” and not out in the culture, that God is exclusively with this particular group and that all our wisdom will come with this kind of [sub]culture. If it came to music, for people who would say that, I would take them to concerts, I would get them to listen to a wide variety of music.But in the end, Christians sometimes just look silly. Keep in touch with what’s going on outside, basically. When it’s too comfortable within your little group, you know that something’s gone wrong; it’s just perpetuating itself.**A&E:** *Also in “Voicing Creation’s Praise” you offer some critiques of the Reformed/Kuyperian vision of culture. Specifically, you write regarding the Reformed view, “that culture tends to be seen as essentially the means by which God’s legal demands are met, rather than a gift for us to enjoy and a means through which he develops and brings to fruition the world he loves.”*Could you unpack this statement a bit?**JB:** Right, right. Well that’s put very starkly, and I wrote that of course ten years ago. But regarding the 17th century Calvinist tradition — this is after John Calvin — it is, I’m afraid, undeniable that the doctrine of God that developed did tend to emphasize, for good or ill, legal demand rather than a trinitarian God of love.The problem with that is that you reverse the doctrine of God; you make God’s demands primary to his love, but really it’s the other way around. Grace comes first, his covenant love comes first; his demands flow out of that.Now, I want to say very strongly that the best of the Dutch Neo-Calvinist tradition knows that. The problem is that the tradition often slips into (in my view) other language, and we forget that culture is basically a gift, that God is basically a trinitarian God of love who gives himself to the world as a constant source of blessing and generosity.I think a lot of Dutch Neo-Calvinists wouldn’t disagree with what I’m saying, but some of their foundational writings do slip into that way of thinking, even the great Kuyper himself. I think there are different sides to Kuyper, as I tried to show in the book. And in fact with virtually all of the people, whether it’s Dooyeweerd or virtually anyone in that tradition, I think there are two sides going on here.And what I would love to see is the best of that tradition, which is the transformational perspective, being undergirded and promoted by a rich, much more rigorously trinitarian theology that emphasizes the priority of grace.**A&E:** *The Orthodox church has a very trinitarian emphasis, and yet you have a composer like John Tavener who comes out of that tradition and goes in a very different direction.***JB:** I think we need to be slightly careful about John Tavener. John Tavener is, of course, Orthodox with a capital “O.” But, it has to be said, his music only expresses a fairly narrow bandwidth of theology within Orthodoxy.There’s much more to Orthodoxy than John Tavener. But you’re dead right, he’s not nearly trinitarian enough. I’ve been through that with him. He talks about how “the absolute simplicity of the one note is God.”I think he’s just flat wrong on that, and I’ve argued that through with him. And I think the idea that complexity or multiplicity is evil or something to be shunned is nonsense, and the trinity denies it.**A&E:** *Springboarding from Tavener, we’re in the midst of this market trend that says “spirituality is hot.” Can you trace a few causes of this trend, and do you think it points to an “era of new opportunity” for the Christian artist?***JB:** Good question. Yes, that’s just the way to put it. I think it’s a new opportunity, but we must be very careful not just to rejoice when a band uses God-language, religious language, with a kind of unthinking endorsement of that; I think that’s just naïve. But the great thing about the postmodern proliferation of options, that whole postmodern theme of “anything goes” — well, if you’re a composer in a music college in Britain, you can compose in virtually any style you want to, and you’ll be accepted. You couldn’t have said that twenty years ago. So at least that allows Christianity to be one of the options.The downside of it is that it will tend to be seen as just another surface style that comes and goes; it won’t be considered in any depth; it will just be seen as a nice sound. And that’s my problem with what John Tavener’s doing. His music can be absolutely wonderful, but often goes no further with any Christian faith or thought. I think someone like James MacMillan is a much, much better exemplar.**A&E:** *What about the student who says, “This is interesting, but I’m not musical, I’m not artistic; how can I engage a song beyond listening to it on the radio?”***JB:** Number one, the people who can’t engage with any music are in a tiny minority. There’s nothing wrong with being in a tiny minority, but they really are tiny; most people can respond to some music. Number two, I would try to encourage a person to have the curiosity to learn more about anything that they encounter, music included. So when someone says, “I don’t know anything about that,” et cetera, I say, “Well aren’t you curious to know?” Challenge someone to learn more. But in the last resort you can’t force anybody, and some people are just not turned on to any of the arts. And I say God makes people in different ways. Hallelujah. |  |
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